

Remarks on Proposed Hate Crimes Legislation

April 25, 2000

Thank you very much. Thank you, Amy Klobuchar and all the other law enforcement officials, civil rights leaders who are here; Attorney General Reno, Deputy Attorney General Holder.

Elían Gonzalez

Before I begin my remarks about hate crimes, I'd like to say just a brief word about the reunion of Elían Gonzalez and his father. After 5 months, it was long overdue. Now that they have been safely reunited, I believe it's time for all of us, including the media and those of us in public life, to give this family the space it needs to heal its wounds and strengthen its bonds; to work to lessen the pressure on them as the matter goes forward in the courts.

The thing that really matters now is that little boy and his life and his family. And I think, at least for the next several days, the less we all say about it and the more time he has to breathe the air of a normal life, the better.

I would like to commend the Attorney General and Deputy Attorney General Holder, the law enforcement, and the INS. They had a very, very difficult job to do, with no easy choices. And I am grateful that they were able to safely reunite the young boy with his father.

Thank you.

Hate Crimes Legislation

We have just had a very, very good meeting with people who are on the frontlines of law enforcement in our communities, people with different responsibilities, very different backgrounds, different viewpoints, who have all come to the same conclusion: We need to work together as partners and as a national community to fight crimes fueled by hate, and we need strong Federal hate crimes legislation.

I want to be clear. Most hate crimes are investigated and prosecuted at the State level. We support that. In fact, one of the reasons that I asked Janet Reno to become Attorney General over 7 years ago is that she

had been a prosecutor in Miami for a dozen years. And I wanted the Federal Government to have a unified law enforcement policy with State and local authorities all across this country in an unprecedented partnership. I think we have achieved that.

But in some of the most brutal, hate-motivated crimes, Federal officials have been prevented from teaming up with local law enforcement. That has denied communities the resources and the expertise they need. We can draw a line against hate by drawing on each other's experiences.

One important way to ensure that hate crimes are punished and justice is done is to make sure we're all able to do our part. And that was the focus of our meeting today. Probably, you've heard me say many times by now that the great irony of this very modern age is that the biggest stumbling block we face is perhaps the oldest problem in human relations—our fear of those who are different from us. It's not a far leap from that kind of fear into distrust and then to dehumanization and then to violence.

We have seen that in case after case across this land: a man dragged to death in Texas because he was black; a young man stretched across a fence in Wyoming because he was gay; children shot in Los Angeles because of their faiths; a young Korean-American shot coming out of church by a man who said he belonged to a church that didn't believe in God, but did believe in white supremacy.

In 1998, the last year for which we have statistics, over 7,700 hate crimes incidents were reported in our Nation, almost one an hour. And it is suspected by the experts that many more go unreported. These are not like other crimes, because these crimes target people simply because of who they are. And because they do, they strike at the heart of who we are as a Nation.

Whenever one of these crimes is committed, it creates a tension and fear that rips at the fabric of community life. This is not a partisan statement, but a simple statement of fact. This is about people who go to work, obey the law, are good citizens, and good neighbors, who ought to be able to live their lives in dignity and without fear of abuse or attack, but cannot. That's why we have worked hard to combat such crimes.

Two and a half years ago I convened the first-ever White House Conference on Hate Crimes. Since then we have increased substantially the number of FBI agents working on them. We have successfully prosecuted a number of serious cases, formed local hate crime working groups in the U.S. attorneys' offices around our Nation, worked to help police officers identify the signs of a hate crime. My budget for the coming year includes funding for hate crime training for law enforcement.

But we must do more. You have already heard today, Federal laws punish some crimes committed against people on the basis of race or religion or national origin. But they are hamstrung by needless jurisdictional requirements for existing crimes. Right now Federal prosecutors cannot prosecute even the most heinous crimes unless the victim was voting, serving on a jury, or doing some other Federally protected activity. That defies common sense.

Today I heard about a case involving three skinheads in Lubbock, Texas, who declared a race war in their community, murdered one African-American as he was walking down the street and injured two others. Local prosecutors and the U.S. Attorney's Office decided together that the case should be tried in Federal court. The skinheads were convicted and are behind bars with no chance of parole. But if the victim had been inside a friend's house instead of on a public street, that would not have been a hate crime under today's Federal law. That doesn't make sense. It shouldn't matter where the murder was committed; it was still a hate crime. And the resources of the Federal Government were needed.

We also must give Federal prosecutors the ability to prosecute hate crimes committed because of sexual orientation, gender, or disability. These account for a growing number of such crimes. As the community leaders have told us today, this is not about taking anything away from States and communities. It's about making sure all our hometowns have the tools they need to fight hate.

So today I want to announce some new ways to do just that. First, the American Prosecutors Research Institute, the research arm of the National District Attorneys Association,

is releasing today a resource guide, the first of its kind, to help prosecutors' offices handle hate crimes investigations and prosecutions. This report was funded by the Justice Department. It highlights model practices around our country, giving guidance on everything from screening cases and investigation to trial preparation to help in preventing the crimes in the first place.

Second, I'm announcing the release of a new guide that highlights promising practices by communities to confront and reduce hate crimes. It spotlights five national models, from California to Maine, for training criminal justice professionals, treating the emotional and practical needs of hate crime victims, and taking creative steps to root out hate from public schools.

Third, and most important, I am renewing my call on Congress to pass a meaningful hate crimes bill. Last year Congress stripped out important hate crimes protections from a bill that had already passed the Senate. I vetoed the bill in part because it did not contain the strong hate crimes provisions we're fighting for.

This year America needs action. No one should be victimized because of how they look, how they worship, or who they are. The one thing I regret today is that all of you, and through our friends in the media who are here, the American people, could not have heard the personal testimony of the two law enforcement officials—who came all the way from Wyoming to be with us—about how the searing experience of Matthew Shepard's murder and their responsibility to investigate it; to get to know his friends, gay and straight alike, and his family; to understand the circumstances of the inhumanity which took his life—how all of that changed their lives. That is really what this is about. We need to provide a law that works. And we need to get beyond the law so that we all work together. It is profoundly important.

Let me say, in a larger sense, this is part of our efforts to make our country a less violent place. I am grateful that crime is at a 25-year low, that homicides are at a 30-year low, that gun crimes have dropped 35 percent in the last 7 years. But as we saw just yesterday at the devastating act of violence

at the National Zoo here in our Nation's Capital, where seven young people were shot and wounded in a senseless act, our country still has too much violence and too much crime.

I'd like to express my concern and support to the Mayor and the entire community and, obviously, to the victims and their families. But whether it's a random act against children or a crime driven by hate, it should be obvious to all of us that we can do more, and we must do more.

Seven years ago and 3 months now, when I became President, I think there were a lot of people who really wondered whether the crime rate could be brought down in our country; whether we could become less violent. In such an atmosphere, maybe reservations about taking even sensible steps could be justified. But today we don't have any excuses. We know we can make America a safer place.

But while the crime rate may be at a 25-year low, and gun crimes may be down 35 percent, and the homicide rate may be down to a 30-year low, there's not a single soul in this room or in this entire country who believes that our children are as safe as they ought to be, that people are safe from hate crimes, no matter what their race, their religion, their condition, or their sexual orientation, that we have done all we can to make this the country it ought to be.

So if you believe that everyone counts and that everyone should have a chance to live his or her life, and if you believe we all do better when we work together, then you've got to help us pass this legislation. It's very important, and we don't have a single excuse not to do it.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:32 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Amy Klobuchar, Hennepin County attorney, Minnesota; and Mayor Anthony A. Williams of the District of Columbia.

Statement on Signing Legislation To Encourage Free and Fair Elections in Peru

April 25, 2000

Today I have signed into law S.J.Res. 43, expressing the sense of the Congress on the importance of free, fair, and democratic elections in Peru. Transparent elections are the foundation of a democratic society.

The people of Peru will go to the polls in the near future for a second and final round to choose their president. I urge that the concerns about the electoral process underscored by the Organization of American States mission to Peru, and by the U.S. Congress in this resolution, be fully addressed in preparations for the second round. The democratic countries of this hemisphere are united in our hope that the election be conducted in a transparent, peaceful, and statesmanlike manner. Democracy is strengthened when all Peruvians have the opportunity to debate and determine the future of Peru.

The people of the United States look forward to continuing the excellent relationship we have enjoyed with the Peruvian people and their democratically elected leaders and to strengthening the bonds that unite our countries.

William J. Clinton

The White House,
April 25, 2000.

NOTE: S.J. Res. 43, approved April 25, was assigned Public Law No. 106-186.

Message to the Senate Returning Without Approval the "Nuclear Waste Policy Amendments Act of 2000"

April 25, 2000

To the Senate of the United States:

I am returning herewith without my approval S. 1287, the "Nuclear Waste Policy Amendments Act of 2000."